



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

FIRE DEPARTMENT

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DARYL L. OSBY
FIRE CHIEF
FORESTER & FIRE WARDEN

February 14, 2012

TO: EACH SUPERVISOR

FROM: DARYL L. OSBY, FIRE CHIEF *DLO*

U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE REPORT - STATION FIRE: FOREST SERVICE'S RESPONSE OFFERS POTENTIAL LESSONS FOR FUTURE WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently released their report titled, "Station Fire: Forest Service's Response Offers Potential Lessons for Future Wildland Fire Management." The purpose of this memorandum is to provide your Honorable Board with a summary of the report only as it relates to a status of the recommendations in your five-signature letter regarding wildfire management protocols, dated January 5, 2010 (attached).

Brush Clearance Requirements

The GAO report states that according to fire officials, the Station Fire highlighted the importance of maintaining defensible space around structures in high-risk areas. The report also identifies the importance of having an action plan to protect critical communications and other infrastructure on Mt. Wilson. Additionally, the report recognizes the following items that have been implemented since the Station Fire:

- The Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region issued a memorandum increasing the minimum requirement for defensible space around structures within and adjacent to national forests from 30 feet to 100 feet.
- The Forest Service has decided to allow 300 feet of defensible space around the communications infrastructure and the Mt. Wilson observatory.

Fire Suppression Methodologies

The GAO report states, "The Station Fire exemplifies a situation where using night-flying aircraft may allow the Forest Service to suppress a fire before it escapes efforts to contain it." The report then recognizes the implementation of the following items:

SERVING THE UNINCORPORATED AREAS OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY AND THE CITIES OF:

AGOURA HILLS
ARTESIA
AZUSA
BALDWIN PARK
BELL
BELL GARDENS
BELLFLOWER
BRADBURY

CALABASAS
CARSON
CERRITOS
CLAREMONT
COMMERCE
COVINA
CUDAHY

DIAMOND BAR
DUARTE
EL MONTE
GARDENA
GLEN DORA
HAWAIIAN GARDENS
HAWTHORNE

HIDDEN HILLS
HUNTINGTON PARK
INDUSTRY
INGLEWOOD
IRVINDALE
LA CANADA FLINTRIDGE
LA HABRA

LA MIRADA
LA PUENTE
LAKEWOOD
LANCASTER
LAWNDALE
LOMITA
LYNWOOD

MALIBU
MAYWOOD
NORWALK
PALMDALE
PALOS VERDES ESTATES
PARAMOUNT
PICO RIVERA

POMONA
RANCHO PALOS VERDES
ROLLING HILLS
ROLLING HILLS ESTATES
ROSEMEAD
SAN DIMAS
SANTA CLARITA

SIGNAL HILL
SOUTH EL MONTE
SOUTH GATE
TEMPLE CITY
WALNUT
WEST HOLLYWOOD
WESTLAKE VILLAGE
WHITTIER

- The Forest Service changed its night-flying policy to authorize the use of specific night-flying aircraft.
 - Note: The Department updated its agreement with the Forest Service to clarify circumstances under which Department night-flying helicopters may be used.
- The Forest Service began a nationwide assessment of the agency's night-flying operations.

The GAO report makes the following recommendations:

- The Forest Service should clarify when it expects agency firefighting resources to be used instead of assets from other sources.
- The Forest Service should document the steps it plans to take in response to the lessons identified in its review of the Station Fire.

The GAO Report regarding the Station Fire can be viewed by accessing the following website: <http://gao.gov/assets/590/587075.pdf>.

In conclusion, the Department's revised agreement with the Forest Service expands the scope for night-flying helicopters by eliminating the previous restrictions, and if needed, allows for the use of the Department's leased CL-415 SuperScoopers. Also, the Department will continue to monitor any progress the Forest Service is making regarding brush clearance and defensible space, and will provide you with an update in 90 days.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (323) 881-6180.

DLO:jc

Attachment

c: William T Fujioka
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Georgia Mattera
Sergio Vasquez
Michelle Cervera
Randi Tahara
Joseph Charney
Susan Nissman
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SACHI A. HAMAI
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January 5, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Los Angeles County's many local jurisdictions contiguous to the Angeles National Forest present challenges to fire officials when it comes to wildfire prevention and suppression. The recent massive and destructive Station Fire within and adjacent to the Angeles National Forest cost local taxpayers \$89 million to fight and millions more in infrastructure recovery costs. Tragically, two Los Angeles County firefighters, Fire Captain Ted Hall and Fire Fighter Specialist Arnie Quinones, lost their lives trying to protect their fire suppression camp headquarters during the fifth day of this fire. The Station Fire graphically spotlights differences in policy which need to be addressed now before the next fire season.

History shows that fire behavior does not respect the value of properties or jurisdictional boundaries, yet there are different fire prevention and fire suppression policies in effect today for national forests. These differences complicate and confuse our ability to provide fire and life safety in and adjacent to the Angeles National Forest. These differences create an even greater wildfire threat to structures within and outside of the forest, and increase every responding agency's costs. Since the Angeles National Forest is the responsibility of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, United States Forest Service, we, as the governing body of Los Angeles County, are asking for your support for changes to current Federal policies which govern the Angeles National Forest and its local officials.

Although the Angeles National Forest is only one of many national forests, its proximity to highly populated urban areas calls for a vastly modified approach to fire prevention and fire response so that a seamless approach exists. As members of the Board of Supervisors, we believe that it is our duty to propose the following policy changes to the current wildfire management protocols in order to help prevent any further loss of human life and property.

We outline the major differences and recommend the following solutions to help bridge these conflicting agency policies:

Different Brush Clearance Requirements

Differences:

- a) Within the Angeles National Forest, brush clearance, the distance of cleared land from the structure to natural vegetation, is limited to 30 feet. By contrast, clearance should be 200 feet from the structure to natural vegetation, as required on certain properties outside of the Angeles National Forest.
- b) Various ridge top communication sites (towers and structures) are extremely vulnerable to a wildland fire because of 30-foot clearance and steep terrain. This vulnerability includes Mt. Wilson, Mt. Disappointment, Mt. Lukens and others, all which provide critical wireless communication coverage for the entire Los Angeles Basin area and beyond.

Recommendations:

- a) Direct the Angeles National Forest to enact and enforce brush clearance distance of 200 feet from all structures within and adjacent to the forest where such clearance encroaches on the forest.
- b) Expand clearance to at least 200 feet as recommended above.
- c) Engage fire protection engineers to develop and apply a fire-resistive ground cover material, creating a buffer zone surrounding such installations to protect them from flames, heat, and flying embers.
- d) Provide incentives for communication/observatory/museum owners to "harden" existing structures to make them fire-resistive (per Los Angeles County Fire Department codes and regulations applicable to the Santa Monica Mountain area).

Different Fire Suppression Methodologies

Difference:

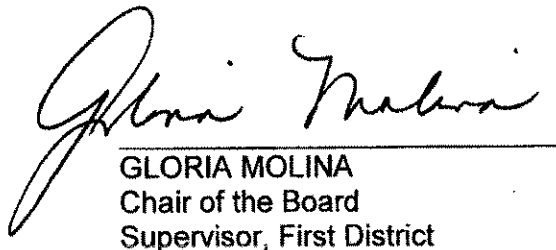
- a) U.S. Forest Service fire suppression policies limit timing and scope in the use of State and local government personnel, equipment and aircraft for early attack and suppression of fires within the Angeles National Forest. These policies have created a fire suppression paradigm that must be changed, especially in forests near major population areas, such as the Angeles National Forest.

Recommendations:

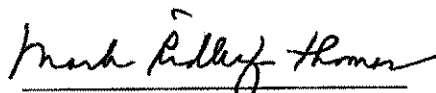
- a) Allow the Angeles National Forest to enter into operating agreements that provide for seamless, as needed, utilization of all federal, State and local fire suppression personnel, equipment and aircraft for any and all fires occurring within the Angeles National Forest (not just Mutual Threat Zones). This would include night flying, use of Super Scoopers and all other equipment and techniques most readily available to effect rapid knockdown and control of all fires.
- b) Modify all existing Wilderness Area legislation to assure that any and all fire suppression equipment and techniques can be applied at the discretion of the fire incident commander without a telephone call seeking permission first.
- c) Direct the creation of an equitable cost apportionment formula between U.S. Forest Service, State, and local government to assure best available fire suppression resources are utilized to effect rapid knockdown and control of fires occurring within the Angeles National Forest.

Clearly, the Station Fire has demonstrated that, while we cannot control the inconceivable actions of an arsonist, we can control and refine an effective wildland fire protection and suppression policy that works in Los Angeles County's unique geographic configuration in order to save life, protect property, and minimize fire suppression costs.

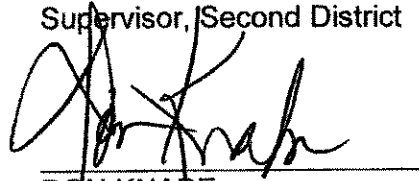
Sincerely,



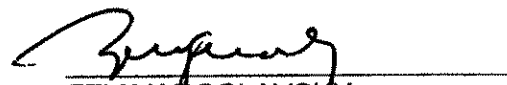
GLORIA MOLINA
Chair of the Board
Supervisor, First District



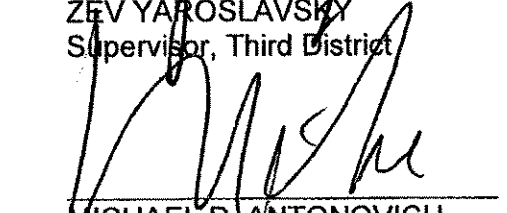
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